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# Coupdunnit

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## What Really Happened in Iran?

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### Uncle Sam's Hidden Hand

*Christopher de Bellaigue*

**F**or as long as the shah of Iran occupied the Peacock Throne, his relations with the United States depended on a mutually accepted falsehood. Neither side stood to gain from acknowledging that Washington's favorite dictator owed his position to American skullduggery. So regarding the events of August 1953, when the shah fled his country after unsuccessfully challenging its constitutionally elected prime minister, only to be restored a few days later after a military coup, both sides stuck to the story that the shah's loyal subjects were responsible for his salvation.

But after 1979, when Islamic and secular revolutionaries overthrew the shah, not everyone felt compelled to maintain the lie any longer. A stream of histories, memoirs, and eyewitness accounts emerged that revealed how American and British spies, and not Iranian royalists, had played decisive roles in the plot to oust the prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq. Now, Ray Takeyh ("What Really Happened in Iran," July/August 2014) has tried to rehabilitate the same discredited myths that prevailed during the shah's time.

To get at the truth, it is necessary to go back to 1951, when Mosaddeq outraged the British by nationalizing

Iran's oil industry, which was then run by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, the precursor to British Petroleum (now BP). Mosaddeq went on to thwart British attempts to topple him, most notably an embargo the United Kingdom placed on Iranian oil, a move that was supported by the United States. In late 1952, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's government appealed for more American help in removing Mosaddeq, arguing that Iran was in danger of falling into the Soviet orbit—a line that the incoming Eisenhower administration readily swallowed.

The coup that took place the following August was a catastrophic success. It extinguished the brief democratic experiment that Iran had enjoyed under Mosaddeq; entrenched the shah, who had already begun to show despotic inclinations; and elevated the United States to the role of top Western power in Iranian affairs (in lieu of the United Kingdom). All these factors contributed to the Iranian Revolution a quarter of a century later and to the widespread perception that the United States had perverted the course of Iranian history.

Takeyh accepts that CIA operatives, led by Kermit Roosevelt, Jr., the chief of the agency's Near East and Africa division, were involved in an attempt—endorsed by the shah (under American pressure) and put into effect on August 15, 1953—to topple Mosaddeq and replace him with a disaffected former cabinet minister, General Fazlollah Zahedi. The scheme failed when Mosaddeq arrested the men who had been sent to depose him. Chaos ensued, the shah fled to Europe, and violence consumed Tehran. In the days that followed, royalist army units girded themselves to intervene

while Mosaddeq was paralyzed by indecision. On August 19, Mosaddeq was almost killed when army units launched an assault on his house. He later surrendered, at which point Zahedi assumed power and the startled shah got word that he could come home.

Takeyh, in his description of what took place in the four days between the two coup attempts, departs from the interpretation of these events that has gained authority since 1979. Takeyh writes that after the initial effort to dislodge Mosaddeq failed, "It seems that some operatives in the CIA station in Tehran thought there was still a chance that Zahedi could succeed," adding that "the station might even have maintained some contact with Zahedi." But, Takeyh claims, "it's not clear whether it did or not. What is clear is that by that point, the attempt to salvage the coup became very much an Iranian initiative." In Takeyh's view, the CIA's role was ultimately insignificant: whatever the agency did or did not do, "Mosaddeq was bound to fall and the shah was bound to retain his throne and expand his power."

In fact, Roosevelt and his fellow plotters were as integral to the second coup attempt as they had been to the first; indeed, the two attempts were separate phases of the same operation. Even if one regards with skepticism Roosevelt's later boast that the shah thanked him in person for saving his throne, there is nothing unclear about the Americans' involvement. Between August 15 and August 19, the CIA protected Zahedi and his coconspirators (who were being sought by Mosaddeq's police), took charge of an effective propaganda campaign that depicted the prime

minister as a rebel against the monarch, and contributed to the disorder on the streets by bribing agents to provoke angry mobs. On the afternoon of August 19, it was Roosevelt who decided when Zahedi would announce over the radio that he had taken power.

### **THE GUILTY PARTY**

Takeyh's highly selective history makes no mention of these facts. At the same time, Takeyh adduces no evidence to support his claim that without the CIA's involvement, the events of 1953 would have ended in the same result. In fact, by building a network of royalist officers, enlisting the shah, and maintaining the plotters' network between August 15 and August 19, the CIA played a leading part in the outcome.

Takeyh almost completely ignores an internal CIA history of the operation written in 1954 by a participant in the plot, Donald Wilber, and leaked to *The New York Times* in 2000. Wilber's account attests to the CIA's crucial role in the run-up to the coup on August 19 and shows that the relationship between Roosevelt and Zahedi was weighted in the American's favor; amid the chaos that day, Zahedi and a fellow plotter were "told to wait for instructions" before Roosevelt informed "his charges" that it was "time for them to play an active role."

Perhaps Takeyh considers this version of events to be one of the "concocted" and "self-serving" American accounts that he claims obscure the truth. If Takeyh believes Wilber's history to be a work of fiction, he should say so. But he does not; in fact, he quotes Wilber's history to prove the point that officials in London and Washington had given up on the plot to overthrow Mosaddeq

after the first coup failed. (That is true—but American agents and diplomats on the ground in Tehran carried on with their plans.)

In 2013, responding to a Freedom of Information Act request filed by the National Security Archive, the CIA acknowledged for the first time that the “coup that overthrew [Mosaddeq] . . . was carried out under CIA direction as an act of U.S. foreign policy.” Is this admission, too, concocted? Given that each admission of American guilt aggravates Iranians’ grievances, this one can hardly be considered self-serving.

### HISTORY OR POLITICS?

Takeyh takes Mosaddeq to task for his increasingly erratic, demagogic leadership in the first half of 1953 and suggests that he was a victim of his own miscalculations. These are fair points, but they do not lessen the odium of the coup. A condition of sovereignty is that national politicians are punished for their domestic transgressions by their own citizens, not by foreign intelligence agencies.

In a speech to the American Iranian Council in 2000, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright acknowledged that the United States had played “a significant role in orchestrating the overthrow of Iran’s popular prime minister,” and that this had been “a setback for Iran’s political development.” Albright’s admission reflected a “narrative of American culpability” that Takeyh deplores, in part because he believes it cedes the moral high ground to Iran in the ongoing nuclear negotiations with its Western adversaries. According to Takeyh, American contrition is unnecessary because the U.S. role in Mosaddeq’s overthrow was ultimately of little consequence.

Takeyh urges the Iranians to abandon their “outdated notions of victimhood” and “move beyond” the martyrology of 1953. Doing so, he declares, would allow them to “claim ownership of their past.”

In such passages, Takeyh compounds his faulty history with moralizing. The past cannot be “owned”—not by the Iranians nor by anyone else. A historian’s job is to find out what happened and explain why. Everything else is just politics.

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### Takeyh Replies

**T**he story of the 1953 coup in Iran is quite simple, despite Christopher de Bellaigue’s attempts to confuse it. During Mohammad Mosaddeq’s tumultuous tenure as prime minister, his dictatorial tendencies and his unwillingness to resolve the oil dispute with the British steadily eroded his support. The shah, meanwhile, retained the loyalty of many Iranian army officers, merchants, and mullahs who preferred an ineffectual monarch to a reckless prime minister. In the end, the shah’s coalition proved more formidable than Mosaddeq’s frayed alliance.

In the heady days of August 1953, Iran witnessed not one but two coup attempts. It is indisputable that the United States was complicit in the first one, which failed when Mosaddeq refused to accept the shah’s order to step down. At that point, Washington gave up on

the idea of ousting Mosaddeq and even considered mending fences with him. For that reason, the second coup was very much an Iranian initiative; Iranian royalists had more at stake and more to lose than the Americans. When the shah triumphantly returned to Tehran, a bewildered White House was overjoyed by its unexpected good fortune.

In alleging that my article minimizes the role that U.S. and British operatives in Tehran played in organizing and executing the second coup, de Bellaigue accuses me of being selective with the facts. But he neglects to deal with those facts himself. He alludes to stale stories about how the CIA paid provocateurs to stir up the crowds that engulfed Tehran in the days between the two coup attempts. But as I noted in my article, documentary evidence reveals that, far from acting as puppet masters, CIA operatives and U.S. embassy staffers in Tehran were surprised at the size and diversity of the crowds. The protesters who took to the streets were not merely thugs hired by the CIA; in fact, they represented a cross section of Iranian society. Mosaddeq's defiance of the shah had outraged them and, in the words of one contemporaneous CIA assessment, had "galvanized the people into an irate pro-Shah force."

If U.S. and British intelligence operatives had truly rescued the coup after the initial failure, one would expect them to have taken credit for doing so in their reports to political leaders in Washington and London. Instead, shortly after the coup, the acting director of the CIA, Charles Cabell, informed U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower that "an unexpectedly strong upsurge of popular and military reaction to Prime Minister Mossadeq's

Government has resulted, according to late dispatches from Tehran, in the virtual occupation of that city by forces proclaiming their loyalty to the Shah and his appointed Prime Minister Zahedi." Similarly, less than a week after the coup, the British Foreign Office reported to the cabinet that "a spontaneous demonstration in favor of the shah started in the bazaar and spread throughout Tehran. . . . The rank and file of the army apparently largely went over to the demonstrators, and by the evening [Zahedi] had emerged from hiding and taken over all the centres of government." In neither account do Western intelligence operatives play a significant role; both the CIA and the Foreign Office primarily credit the Iranians with restoring the monarchy.

#### **PERSIAN PAWNS?**

De Bellaigue also claims that the CIA "took charge of an effective propaganda campaign that depicted the prime minister as a rebel against the monarch." The CIA did help the royalists spread their anti-Mosaddeq message, as I noted in my article. But can something be propagandistic if it is also true? Mosaddeq was, in fact, a rebel against the monarch. The shah had the constitutional right to dismiss his prime minister; once he did so, on August 15, he rendered Mosaddeq's premiership illegal and unconstitutional. Mosaddeq's refusal to step down was quite clearly a rebellion against Iran's constitutional order.

De Bellaigue accepts the view that General Fazlollah Zahedi and his fellow coup plotters were essentially mercenaries, awaiting commands from the CIA operative Kermit Roosevelt, Jr. As I explained in my article, it is difficult

to assess if there was any contact between the CIA station in Tehran and Zahedi's group during the four days between the two coup attempts. The claims made by the internal CIA history that de Bellaigue cites have been disputed by a number of Iranian participants in the coup and by Zahedi's son Ardeshir, who was with his father during the events in question.

The fact is that Iranian military officers had their own reasons for plotting against Mosaddeq, and they required neither instigation nor instruction from Roosevelt. Under the shah, and during the rule of his father before him, the military and the monarchy were indivisible. The army was an essential pillar of the shah's rule. That is why Mosaddeq—who wanted to weaken the shah—continuously purged the army's officer ranks, cut the military's budget, and hollowed out its institutions.

Zahedi and his conspirators had ample motive to hasten the shah's restoration and oust Mosaddeq, and the army took a number of steps to consolidate its control of the country during the four days between the two coup attempts. But the image of the Iranian military as a competent institution acting in its own self-interest upsets the paternalistic narrative of the coup that de Bellaigue prefers, in which the Iranians—elites and ordinary people alike—appear as benighted pawns in the hands of diabolically clever Americans.

## NOT EVEN PAST

De Bellaigue trumpets the notion that just last year, the CIA acknowledged that the coup was "an act of U.S. foreign policy." A reader would be forgiven for interpreting this as suggesting that the director of the CIA mounted a podium

and finally came clean. The truth is more prosaic, more complex, and less definitive. In the summer of 2013, the agency did rerelease a study conducted in the mid-1970s by one of its in-house historians. Titled *The Battle for Iran*, the report had been released once before, in 1981, with a significant number of redactions. The version released last year is fuller, yet still heavily censored: the most important sections, which deal with the planning and execution of the coup, are still classified. The study remains silent on the critical question of who was primarily responsible for the second coup attempt. It is therefore hardly the last word on the matter.

De Bellaigue faults me for moralizing but then does some moralizing of his own, proclaiming that "the past cannot be 'owned.'" That is true: but neither can the past be denied. De Bellaigue is free to cling to his cherished myth, in which helpless, ignorant Iranians were victimized by nefarious, all-knowing Westerners. He'll get no complaints from the theocrats in Tehran, who exploit the image of a rapacious Great Satan to justify their tyrannical rule. But those concerned with the truth have good reason to question the reductive conventional wisdom about what happened in 1953 and embrace the facts. 🍷